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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 002007

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [MASS](#) [EAID](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: NEW PRIME MINISTER SEES HOPE FOR PEACE

REF: (A) COLOMBO 2003 (B) COLOMBO 1982

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead for reason 1.4 (D).

¶1. (C) Summary. New Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremayake reacted with optimism to LTTE leader Prabhakaran's November 27 Heroes' Day speech, said that a return to war is not an option and expressed appreciation for U.S. military assistance. He said the anti-conversion bill will not come back for consideration. Given his hawkish reputation, his comments on the peace process, although vague, are welcome. End Summary

Continued Disaster Management Cooperation

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¶2. (C) The Ambassador and DCM (notetaker) called on new Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremayake November 28. In addition to the premiership, Wickremayake will head a new Ministry of Disaster Management and maintain his position as Deputy Minister of Defense. Turning first to his new Disaster Management ministry, Wickremayake said it will enfold functions and personnel that now fall under the Social Services and Scientific Affairs ministries and thus will take some time to get off the ground. The Ambassador briefed Wickremayake on the various Embassy-facilitated interactions between American and Sri Lankan disaster management specialists since the tsunami and expressed hope they would continue. The Prime Minister concurred.

Military Budgets and Assistance

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¶3. (C) Turning to his defense responsibilities, Wickremayake confirmed that the Ministry of Public Security has been abolished and that police functions will be brought back into the Ministry of Defense, as was the case until several years ago. He attributed this move to a desire to curb the number of ministries rather than any substantive or policy reason. Asked about the significant increase in defense spending in the recently-promulgated budget, Wickremayake said much of it will be for the "social services" aspects of the military, in other words for increases in salaries and benefits. Morale has declined of late, he said, as military personnel have seen civil service benefits outstripping theirs. The Ambassador told the Prime Minister that the U.S. intends to continue its program of military assistance with which he is familiar as Deputy Defense Minister (Wickremayake, for example, presided at the handing over ceremony for the surplus U.S. Coast Guard cutter earlier this year). The Prime Minister said U.S. military assistance was greatly appreciated and he hoped the levels could be increased.

Hopeful Opening on Peace

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¶4. (C) The Ambassador told the Prime Minister that the United States remained committed to helping achieve peace and prosperity in Sri Lanka and asked Wickremayake how he and President Rajapakse planned to move forward on peace. Wickremayake turned immediately to the November 27 Heroes' Day Speech by LTTE leader Prabhakaran (septel): "It's an opening and it's up to us to respond. He (Prabhakaran) is being careful but has given us hope." The Prime Minister continued that all members of Rajapakse's coalition agree that "war is out" and that "we must get back to the peace table and negotiate with an open mind. We expect the same open mind from the LTTE." Asked how the cease-fire agreement (CFA) should be "strengthened" (as both the President and PM have stated), Wickremayake said the government had no specific ideas yet but commented that both child abductions by the LTTE and LTTE entry into cleared areas with weapons had to be addressed. Asked about the breakaway LTTE Karuna faction,

Wickremayake referred to it as "small but influential" and (somewhat uncomfortably) said the government was "studying" how to approach the issue. The Ambassador emphasized that continued killings by the Karuna faction--and the tit-for-tat response by the LTTE--were a threat to the ceasefire. Wickremayake said the President was "thinking about" the proper role for the Norwegian peace process facilitators.

Anti-conversion Bills Dead

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15. (C) In response to the Ambassador's question about the status of anti-conversion legislation (Wickremayake was Buddhist Affairs minister in the previous government and a proponent of the bill), the Prime Minister said that the bill sponsored by the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party had lapsed when Parliament was prorogued, but would probably be reintroduced to no avail. The government bill was dead, he said. "The issue will not arise," he concluded.

Comment

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16. (C) Given Wickremayake's reputation as a hawk on the peace process, his positive reaction to Prabhakaran's speech and his comment that war is not an option are welcome. Less encouraging is the fact that, like the President, he does not yet seem to have any detailed ideas on how to bring about tangible progress on peace. His about-face on the anti-conversion bill is good news.

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